

## Tough Choices: Questions for Stacey LoMedico



Stacey LoMedico is the director of the city's Park & Recreation Department, which is shouldering large cuts in Mayor Jerry Sanders' proposed budget adjustments. Photo: Sam Hodgson

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**Saturday, Nov. 8, 2008** | For weeks, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders has been talking about a \$43 million shortfall in the city's \$1.1 billion budget. But it wasn't until this week that [the deficit hit home](#) to San Diegans in the form of shuttered libraries and recreations centers and a myriad of other programs and services that will be curtailed or eliminated.

As much as any department in the city, Park & Recreation Department represents the value that citizens receive from their tax dollars. The department was hit hard -- nine recreation centers will be closed, and nearly 50 full-time positions will be eliminated. I

spoke with Park & Recreation Director Stacey LoMedico about the impact of those cuts, and how the department will cope with them.

***From a pure staffing standpoint, the mayor's proposed budget cuts hit park & recreation harder than just about any other department. Give me some insight into the situation facing the department.***

The Park & Rec Department is no different than other city departments that took difficult cuts for this \$43 million shortfall. I think it is important to put into perspective that the \$2.2 million reduction that we took is about 2.5 percent of our overall budget of \$88 million.

Why I believe they are substantial at this point, and why we are looking at programs and services and shutting down, hopefully temporarily, our rec centers is because the Park & Rec Department has taken substantial cuts over the last 10 years.

And the services we provide to the community and the visitors of our parks, I think sometimes they don't realize that there is nothing left. For example, over the last 10 years we have taken nearly 300 full-time equivalent positions. And when you add in hourly you are probably looking at 500 employees who have been impacted, totaling \$24.3 million -- that's in just the last 10 years. We have received funding for new programs, but we have continued to take cuts in the last two years -- we've had over 100 full-time employees and \$10 million cut.

We are at the point now where the funding and the individuals that we have to perform the many services in the nation's second largest municipal park system (Jacksonville, Fla. is the largest), we need every last bit of it. I met with about 500 of my employees this morning, and I went through these details with them, and I asked them: "Is there more to give in your unit?" And I asked them to please raise their hand if there is no more to give. I would say 75 to 80 percent raised their hands. So I think we are at that point where the community is going to see the impacts.

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***In what area of park and recreation do you think city residents will end up feeling the cuts the most?***

I think the most impacted would be those who go to the particular rec center that is scheduled to temporarily close. That is going to be the most severe impact, those families who enjoy the services that those centers and the staff provide now.

***What about in a more general sense. Will people notice that parks aren't being maintained as well, that there is more trash than there used to be?***

I would say the answer to that is no. And the reason for that is in previous reductions over the last 10 years, of course we have taken program reductions.

But we have tried to reduce equivalently between recreation and maintenance. We have

tried to make a cut here, a cut there. The program cuts ... are not picking one (recreation or maintenance) over the other. There are a few vacant positions we have recommended for reduction that have been vacant for some time. And we don't anticipate that there will be any noticeable service changes because of that. We have tried to make the reductions in programs themselves. That is why you have the elimination of the fire rings, no trash pickup at 29 viewpoints along the shoreline. That whole area will definitely be impacted. We are getting out of the business of picking up trash in the right of way. Communities will feel the impact in terms of skate parks no longer being staffed.

***Mayor Sanders has made it a point to say that city residents will have to step up and do things they haven't done in the past to help alleviate the effects of the cuts. What does he mean by this, from your point of view?***

I think that in terms of park & recreation reductions, in some communities, instead of walking to a facility, people would have to find transportation to the nearest one that is open.

We have 52 rec centers, of which we are proposing to close nine centers and a gym. In addition to that, during the winter months those who enjoy Mission Bay may be inconvenienced in terms of an available restroom. There will be plenty of restrooms open in Mission Bay, but there will be 13 closed for the winter.

***Are you going to go so far as to encourage people to volunteer to perhaps create community trash pickup programs, or other similar things?***

Absolutely. The Park & Recreation Department has the second most volunteers behind police.

We can't do what we do everyday now with the funding that we have without our volunteers. They are core to us. They volunteer on advisory councils; they help out on a weekly basis on recreation programs and special events. They join their neighbors already and help pick up trash in not only our community parks, but our regional parks -- Balboa and Mission Bay. So yes, we will continue to have an active volunteer program -- that goes without saying. And we will encourage people to participate.

***It's been shown time and time again that park and recreation plays a role in public safety. If there are more rec centers and athletic programs, more kids are off the streets and doing productive things. Are you worried that we will see an increase in youth crime as a result of the cuts?***

What I would hope would happen and what I would want to happen is for us to continue to have active events at the parks. The parks themselves will still have ball fields available. We will still have playgrounds available. We will still have recreational opportunities for families and adults. We will also ensure that parks are kept clean and well maintained.

But the building itself and the recreational programs will have to be utilized at another rec center. We just hope people will continue to do that at the nearest rec center.

***Is it a valid concern that more kids will be on the streets, and not have access to programs?***

Well, the reductions that we had in our rec centers, we tried to take the smallest centers that we have in our system. And most of them are within a half-mile to three miles from another community rec center. So we are very hopeful that individuals will utilize the centers that are close in proximity, and take the same crafts, arts, youth football and the programs that we offer at those sites. So we hope they will move over to the next site.

***Would you be concerned with overcrowding? You already have people at the other sites enrolled --***

No, I am not concerned about that. No. We have incredible staff, they will make it work. Our whole mission in park and recreation is to provide quality recreation programs and amenities. And my staff does that -- I am not concerned at all.

***The mayor has said the city will not "fee its way out of the budget mess." However, in many areas the city does not recover the cost of providing services through fees. How big of an issue is this in park and rec, and what are your feelings about increasing fees?***

In terms of fees, we have a substantial fee schedule. We currently charge fees for a variety of programs and services, as well as fees for large special events that come to our regional facilities. We will as we go into fiscal year 2010 look at our existing fees, and look to see if there are opportunities where we can potentially raise user fees. We will definitely be prepared in fiscal year 2010 to do that.

***What has been the effect of these proposed cuts on employee morale?***

I offered to my employees (it was not mandatory) for them to attend [a meeting Wednesday morning], I also invited the unions to attend. I expected around 250 people. There were 500. The mood was one of interest. I think subdued. We all take pride -- every single one of us -- in the services we provide. And we take it seriously, and I think it pains us that we along with other city employees that we have to go through this. But I found at the end of the meeting a resolve to work through it, as we always do -- we are resilient. And we will support each other, and our other city employees.

-- Interview by [DAVID WASHBURN](#)